DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 223 353 PS 013 207

TITLE What Shall We Tell the Children?
INSTITUTION Bananas, Inc., Oakland, Calif.
PUB DATE 82
NOTE 16p.
AVAILABLE FROM Parenting in a Nuclear Age, c/o Bananas, 6501 Telegraph Avenue, Oakland, CA 94609 ($1.00).
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Children; *Nuclear Warfare; *Parent Role; *Political Socialization; *Social Action

ABSTRACT

Ways parents can help their children deal with information and emotions associated with the threat of nuclear war are offered in this paper. Also included is a list of actions that children can take to make their opposition to nuclear war known. (RH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED223353

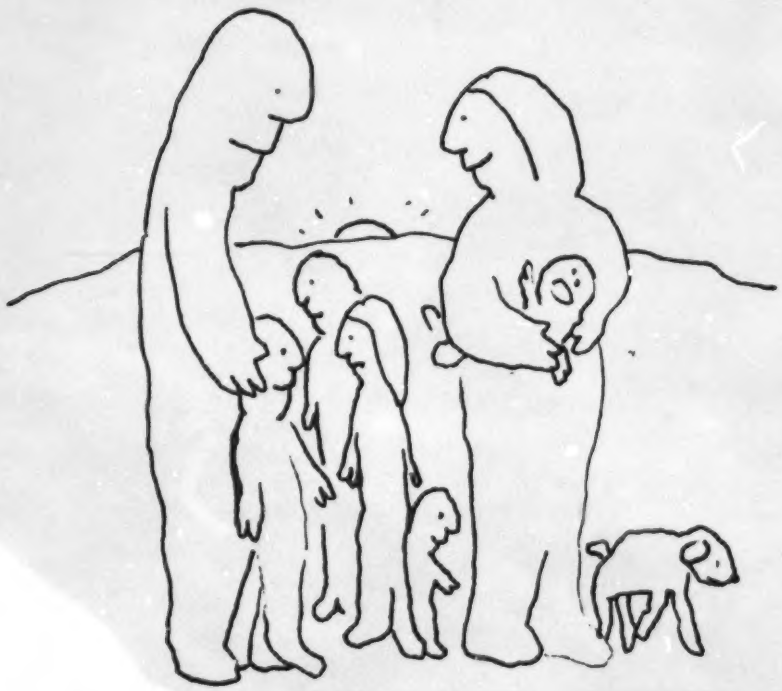
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

WHAT SHALL WE TELL THE CHILDREN?



"Out of the blue one morning, I imagined life with my husband and daughter without the threat of nuclear war. What tremendous relief I felt! As if a real weight had been lifted. I hadn't realized how much my life was affected by my fear of a nuclear holocaust. Since that day I see everything differently. The most important thing of all seems to be working to make that imaginary sweetness real."

PS013207

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Mildred Sullivan

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Living in the nuclear age profoundly affects how we think, what we do and the kind of future we are able to imagine for ourselves and our children. It is only within the last few years that most of us have become familiar with such phrases as "melt down," "limited nuclear war" or "first strike capability." Along with our expanded vocabulary comes the new and terrifying awareness that nuclear war and the destruction of society as we know it is within the realm of possibility.

What impact does this consciousness have on our lives and the lives of our children? To what extent are we able to go about "business as usual?" How can we learn about the dangers without being overcome by despair? How can we help our children grow up strong and hopeful if we ourselves so often feel weak and without hope?

Parenting in a Nuclear Age is a group of parents who came together in March of 1982 to address these questions. We have been meeting with each other and with other parent groups in the Bay Area. Some have already had to help their children deal with nightmares about nuclear holocaust. Many feel confounded when their children ask about nuclear war. Others are wondering what their kids already know, how or what to tell them, and at what age.

As parents we share the desire to protect our children from debilitating feelings of fear and hopelessness. In our effort to protect, however, it is important that we do not act to silence our children or to deny that fear is a healthy emotional response to frightening situations. If we are able to acknowledge fear--both in ourselves and in our children--we are in a better position to be able to move beyond it. We begin to find that there are ways to share this issue with our children that give strength both to them and to ourselves. As we begin to talk about the issue and to find ways to involve ourselves in the struggle against the arms race, we discover that it is through acknowledgement, and not denial, that we truly protect our children.

CONFRONTING OUR OWN DESPAIR

There is every reason to feel overwhelmed by despair. Indeed, it is impossible to think about what might happen, to hear the statements of our "leaders" and not feel desperate. Which is why so many of us try not to think about it.

An important first step is to acknowledge that it is impossible to isolate ourselves from this issue. As parents, we have a special commitment to the future and we do know enough to involve ourselves. We are the experts on our children.

We must learn to confront our despair, to acknowledge that what we fear will not go away but is now a part of our lives. In many ways, talking about nuclear war and the way it makes us feel is taboo. It is a taboo that must be broken by deciding that we as individuals and as families are willing to talk and are open to listening to others.

Wherever the process leads us, as we open ourselves to our feelings, it is important to remember that the challenge we face is a very difficult and unique one. There's no such thing as normal life anymore, if by normal we mean a life free from fears for our planet. Business is not as usual.

We take the first step beyond despair if we provide ourselves and others with a safe place to discuss our feelings. We may soon be able to act with greater assurance in supporting our children. Breaking out of isolation and silence is essential. As Steve, with kids aged 5 and 9 put it, "After all, if I couldn't face the arms race, my kids would have to face it alone."

TALKING WITH KIDS

If we can provide our children with a way to talk about their fear, anger or confusion about nuclear war, we have told them that these feelings are not wrong. We can tell and show our children that talking with people is the best way to start feeling better.

For both adults and children, the unknown is often more frightening than the explained. Remember that many children do not know what they feel before they say it. Help your child gain control of vague feelings by defining them in words.

Sometimes children pick up bits of misinformation, or they get ideas confused and out of proportion. They imagine dangers that are real and unreal. Help them sort it out. Acknowledge your child's fears and tell the truth. Keep your explanations simple and undramatic. For example, when Kathy's five-year-old asked what nuclear bombs were, she answered, "Nuclear bombs are more dangerous than other kinds of weapons. If they are used they could kill many of the people and animals in the world. That is why they must never be used and a lot of people are working hard to stop them from being made." At times you might reassure yourself that you are on the right track with a question of your own, such as "Does that answer your question?" or "Is that what you wanted to know?" Leave the discussion open by saying, "These are real hard things to talk about for grownups, too. Let's talk about them again soon."

Present information and answers to children's questions in the most positive way possible. Roxanne and her nine-year-old daughter visited an art show by survivors of the bombing of Nagasaki. Her daughter asked, "Would my skin come off in a nuclear war like in the pictures?" Roxanne responded, "That's a very scary question for me to think about because I love you so much, but, yes, the truth is it would, and that's why so many of us are working so hard to stop nuclear weapons from being made."

Parents have the privilege and responsibility to edit information according to the needs of their children. Try to be clear with yourself why you are not talking about a certain subject. Is it because you feel that topic is too frightening for a child, or because it is too emotionally threatening to you given your experiences? If you are uncomfortable discussing something, let your child know that with a simple statement like, "I'd like to explain this to you but it's just too sad for me to talk about right now. Let me try to think about it for a few days." Then you have acknowledged your child's questions and feelings as well as shown your child that you too have feelings that must be respected.

Do not force the issue. Remember that kids also have the right not to hear about the nuclear threat. We must respect them if they say "Don't talk about it." Our object is not to make kids face reality at any cost, but to help them deal with the reality they already perceive.

If children say nothing about nuclear war, it does not mean they are not thinking about it. Often young children's thoughts are best revealed in their play. Watch carefully and try to discuss it in an open way. Perhaps say, "I noticed you were playing war. I'd like to know more about your game. Could we write a story about it?" With some children you may be able to find out their concerns by initiating a discussion of a news program, an event of the day or an interaction between them and their peers. You might say, "When I hear about people fighting on the news I feel ____. What do you feel like?"

Some part of the fear of nuclear war is fear of death itself, and you can help your child talk about this too. Our culture prefers to bury the subject of death altogether, but from other cultures and our own best instincts we can draw a description of death as being an integ.al part of life. It is clearer for children to talk about a specific incident like the death of a pet or a garden in the fall than about an abstract concept. Again, our goal is to be honest but optimistic.

When we do talk to our children, remember they ARE different. Some are quick to ask direct questions, some need others to draw out their feelings. In giving information, consider your child's emotional needs and knowledge of the world.

THINGS FOR KIDS TO DO

Giving children information about nuclear weapons is not enough. They must be given the chance to do something about what they have learned, to defend themselves. Taking action gives children strength. Sue, who has two sons, 11 and 14, says, "Six months ago my kids were terrified. Since they have gotten more and more involved in direct actions, like writing letters and demonstrating, the change in their attitude is dramatic. Not that they aren't scared any more, but they aren't limited by fear. They no longer say, 'I don't want to hear about it.'"

Taking action against nuclear war assumes many forms. Obviously there is a big difference between writing a letter and sitting in at a nuclear reactor. Try to help your kids choose which actions are right for them.

KIDS CAN:

Write a letter to President Reagan.

While the president may not be immediately convinced to disarm, he does tally opinions expressed in the mail. Your child can share the letter with friends, relatives, school and newspapers. The president's address is The White House, Washington, DC 20500. Your child will get a reply from the president. Most likely it will be in language difficult for a child to understand. Discuss it. This could be a time to discuss how people around the world have conflicting beliefs and we must work to solve our differences peacefully.

The Children's Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament is a group of children in Vermont who have collected thousands of letters from children to President Reagan asking for disarmament. On two occasions they have taken full mailbags to Washington and read the letters alound in front of the White House. Their address is CCND, Box 550, RD #1, Plainfield, VT 05667.

Telephone the White House.

Children are often eager to use the phone to express themselves. The cost is 26 cents for three minutes before 8 a.m. from California. A polite operator answers and takes notes of all comments. One parent says, "We keep the number by the breakfast table. If there's something particular in the morning paper, we call, or maybe we just call anyway." The phone number is (202) 456-7634.

Write a letter to a pen pal in the Soviet Union

It is important that we see families in other nations as people with feelings much like our own. One good way to do this is to make friends through the mail. You can get the address of a child in the Soviet Union to correspond with through Russian "Pioneer" youth groups in major cities. Write to the Pioneer Palace, International Club, Moscow (or Leningrad, Kiev, etc.), U.S.S.R.

Help with group projects.

There is always work for volunteers in a peace group--getting out mailings, answering the phone, leafletting. Children and parents can work on these tasks together and make new friends in the process. Kids can help raise money in all sorts of creative ways, from lemonade stands and car washes to puppet shows and antinuclear variety shows. The amount of money raised in each event isn't great, but the feeling of involvement is.

Demonstrate for peace.

If you are going to a non-violent march or rally, ask your children to come with you. Tell them that every person there makes our statement for peace stronger. Before you do, discuss safe, appropriate ways to behave in a crowd and pack up a few snacks and clothes for a change of weather. Demonstrations often don't stick to their time schedules. Older kids may be able to go on their own or with friends. If you make plans to meet each other, be specific.

Children can also make their own signs, posters and banners. These can make the kids feel like they are more a part of the demonstration.

Give up something for peace.

By giving up some special treat--a movie, record, birthday or Christmas present--and donating the money saved to an anti-nuclear organization, children learn that we have to make sacrifices to build the world we want.

Talk to people.

When kids share their concern for the future of the planet with other kids and adults, it has a special impact. Grownups have been spurred into action by a concerned and informed child. Kids are good at reminding adults what's really important.

Join or form a discussion or affinity group.

Kids, usually teenagers, can join their peers in any of these activities, forming a support group for each other, providing a place to educate themselves and talk about their feelings.

Be patient with parents' endless meetings.
Explain to your children that they are doing a big job when they help out at home and share their parents during meetings. One mother began having "animal meetings" with her three-year-old and his stuffed animals. They all sat on the bedroom floor, set an agenda, and took turns "speaking." This helped the child to understand what his mother was doing in all of those evening meetings.

Adults have a responsibility to make all this happen. Grownups need to let children know that they are ready to act as resources--by providing moral support, information, transportation. For example, let kids know you would be glad to have a group meeting in your home and provide a snack.

Reinforce generous behavior towards animals, people and the environment. Show how pleased you are when your children act peacefully. Draw the connections between our own individual lives and world politics by saying something like, "I hope someday countries will use words instead of weapons to solve their problems too," or "I wish everyone treated our planet with the same love you have for your garden."

Be sensitive to the fact that your children are taking responsibility for their own lives and for our planet in a safe and knowledgeable way.

Most important, our kids must be given a chance to decide which of the choices they want to act on. We can guide, but never push.

YOU CAN'T HUG YOUR CHILDREN WITH NUCLEAR ARMS.

GAINING STRENGTH FROM EACH OTHER

Talk with your children about the strength we have as individuals and as a community to say no to war. Talk about the strength that millions of people have when each one, each family, is doing something for peace. Tell your child that this strength gives you hope for the future.

Talk about the times each of you has been brave, and about how that felt. Talk about the things that make you and your kids feel strong: feeling loved, making something, running and jumping, working together with others, singing.

Learn with your child about people who have devoted their lives to peace. Read together from the world's literature and mythology about heroines and heroes who overcame great odds in the struggle for justice. Discuss the future positively. Share your vision of a better world with them. Let kids know that a peaceful, moral way of life is not only wothwhile now, but really does help create a joyful future.

Tell your kids that what they do, no matter how small, is important. They will believe us if we believe in ourselves and our actions. As psychiatrist Robert Lifton concluded from his study of the effects of the nuclear age on kids, "The truth is, everything depends on what we do."

the strength that
millions of people have
when
each one
each family
is doing something
for peace...

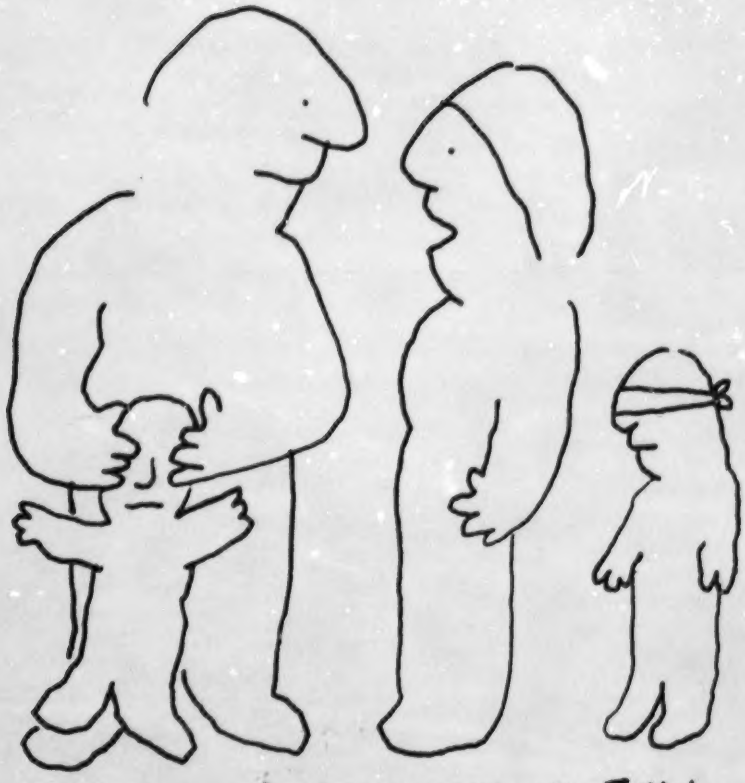
FINDING CONSOLATION AND RENEWAL

After our children have talked about their feelings and written letters, there may still be times when they, and we, feel overwhelmed. In order to get through these times, we must allow ourselves to put thoughts of nuclear dangers out of our minds. We can say to ourselves and to our children, "Do what you can for peace, and when you're not doing that, do something else you care about and enjoy."

We must also remember to be kind to ourselves in our role as parents. There are so many ways we can feel "wrong" when we discuss the nuclear issue, that we forget how many ways are okay. We feel we must offer our children "the answer," though we know there is no single answer. Remember that coming to grips with such a difficult issue is a process. We must allow ourselves to make mistakes and congratulate ourselves when we find the words and actions that make sense for ourselves and our families.

Finally, we need to recognize the power of so many people being brought together to work for peace. It is an important lesson both for ourselves and our children. Not even the threat of nuclear annihilation can kill the human spirit, or take away our love for each other or our amazement at the life around us.

Parenting In A Nuclear Age
c/o 6501 Telegraph Avenue
Oakland, CA 94609



IT'S JUST NOT WORKING, JOHN.